

Exercise And Arthritis

Arthritis is becoming a more prevalent health problem—and not just among the elderly. More than 40 million people have arthritis, including 33% of individuals over the age of 65. The good news is that a program of moderate exercise can offset the pain associated with this indiscriminate disease.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis means “inflammation of a joint.” Osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, is characterized by a progressive loss of cartilage, typically in the hands, shoulders, hips or knees. Common symptoms include joint pain, limited range of motion and swelling. Rheumatoid arthritis, which is far less common, causes the inner linings of the joints to become inflamed.

How can exercise help?

For many years, doctors have recommended that patients with arthritis engage in flexibility training to help improve range of motion and reduce some of the stiffness in their afflicted joints. In recent years, doctors have also begun to recognize the benefits of cardiovascular exercise and strength training. Not only does a well-rounded exercise program preserve joint range of motion and flexibility, but it also reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, increases joint stability and lessens the physical and psychological pain that often accompanies a diagnosis of arthritis.

Exercising Safely With Arthritis

Before beginning any type of exercise program, talk it over with your physician. He or she may have some specific concerns or considerations you should keep in mind. Once you begin a program, the primary goal is to improve functional capacity to help reduce pain and fatigue associated with activities of daily living. A secondary focus is to improve physical fitness.

Start your exercise program with a goal to improve flexibility. Try to move your joints through their full range of motion at least once per day, holding the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Take your time with these exercises and never stretch to the point of pain or discomfort.

By focusing on flexibility, you reduce your risk of injury and limber up the joints that have been stiffened by arthritis. Your physical therapist or trainer can help you to choose the most effective stretches for you.

Progress to strengthening exercises to improve muscular endurance. Depending on the severity of your arthritis, your physician or physical therapist may suggest either isometric or isotonic exercises. Isometric exercise, such as pushing one palm against the other, involves contracting the muscle without moving the joint. Isotonic exercise, such as a biceps curl, involves contracting the muscle while moving one or more joints. These exercises can be done easily with weights, elastic tubing or exercise bands. Engage in resistance-training activities two to three times per week. Your muscles



need time to recover and repair, so take at least one day off in between strength-training workouts. Be careful not to lift too much, too soon. Take your time and build up gradually.

Once you've developed a flexibility and resistance-training routine, incorporate aerobic activity. Cardiovascular exercise programs reduce pain and morning stiffness and improve walking speed and balance. Aim for participating in cardiovascular exercise such as walking, swimming or bicycling three to five times per week. As with strength training, start aerobic exercise slowly and progress gradually.

Depending on your current fitness level, you may want to start with as little as two minutes of activity three times a day and work your way up to a single 20-minute session three to five times per week.

Finish every workout with stretching, choosing exercises that minimize the stress on the most painful joints.

Do What Works for You

Many people with arthritis can excel in a community-based fitness program under the guidance of a knowledgeable and experienced instructor or trainer, such as an ACE-certified Advanced Health & Fitness Specialist with a special interest in helping individuals with arthritis. Others may benefit more from a rehabilitation program with a physical therapist. The key is to find what works best for you to adopt a safe, effective and fun exercise program that will set you on your way to greater mobility and better health.

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